

Why is ECT still being given?

Depression can be very severe, sometimes leading to a reluctance to eat or drink adequately or result in delusions and hallucinations. In these circumstances ECT can be very effective. Some people who have had ECT in the past request to have it again due to the rapid improvement of symptoms.

When is ECT given without consent?

The treatment is given to people who have consented to it. This means that they have had a full discussion of what the procedure involves and possible side effects. Some people, however, become so unwell that they are unable to consider all of these issues. In these circumstances it may not be possible for them to give consent. When this happens, it may be possible to give ECT without consent using the Mental Health Act. This will involve obtaining a second medical opinion from an independent doctor. The clinical team will speak to the family and consider views the patient may have expressed before becoming unwell. However, treating someone who does not consent is very rare.

Further Information

National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence
Scottish ECT Accreditation Network
Electro Convulsive Therapy Accreditation Services

This leaflet is adapted from that produced by the Royal College of Psychiatrists public education editorial board.

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Information Leaflet

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What is ECT?

The National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence have looked at the use of ECT and agreed that it is an effective form of treatment for severe depression and other conditions. It is unlikely to help those with mild depression.

ECT is a way of causing someone to have a seizure which is necessary for the treatment to be effective. It is brought about by passing a small electrical current across the brain. The current is produced by an ECT machine.

It can be given to the whole brain (bilateral) or to one side (unilateral). Bilateral ECT works more quickly and effectively and is widely used in this country. It can result in confusion after the treatment is given, but this is only temporary. Unilateral ECT takes longer to be effective but causes less confusion. The seizure is very similar to that which occurs in people with certain types of epilepsy. However, ECT does not cause epilepsy.

The treatment is given using a very short-acting anaesthetic and muscle relaxant so that the physical effects of the treatment are very small. By finding the right dose of electricity, the aim of the treatment is to cause a seizure lasting between 10 and 50 seconds. Heart rate, blood pressure, breathing, oxygen levels and brain waves are monitored throughout treatment. You will be asleep for about 5 minutes. Full recovery from the anaesthetic may take up to 2 hours or so.

What happens during ECT?

When you arrive, you will be met by a member of staff who will carry out routine physical checks and answer any questions you may have. You will be helped on to a trolley to receive your treatment and the monitoring equipment will be connected. A needle is placed into a vein and anaesthetic is given. This will result in drowsiness and sleep. A muscle relaxant is then given. The treatment will be given by the psychiatrist. The effects wear off within 2 or 3 minutes and you will be moved to the recovery area where monitoring will take place until you are fully awake.

How often is ECT given?

This is given on a Monday and Thursday morning. It is usually about 2 to 3 weeks before there is any noticeable improvement although full recovery may take longer. Treatment is discontinued as soon as a good recovery has been made.

What happens after ECT?

ECT can relieve the symptoms of depression such as depressed mood, anxiety, poor sleep, depressive thoughts and concentration difficulties. However, it has no influence on personal difficulties.

When your symptoms improve, you may be able to look back at why you became unwell and take steps to continue your recovery. Additionally, psychotherapy and counselling can help some people. Medication is usually needed to help maintain the benefits.

What if I really don't want ECT?

If you have strong feelings about it you should make them known to the staff who recommend the treatment for you. Your views must be considered when your treatment plan is discussed with you.

What are the side effects of ECT?

Some people complain of a headache following treatment. There may be some drowsiness, general muscle ache, nausea, light-headedness and confusion. This improves within a few hours.

A very small number of people complain of permanent areas of memory loss involving particular events that have occurred in the past. Most memory difficulties improve after treatment is stopped. It is sometimes difficult to separate the effects of ECT from the memory problems which occur during an episode of depression. There is usually a loss of memory for each episode of treatment and for up to an hour or two afterwards. ECT does not cause any form of brain damage.

How does ECT work?

No one is really certain about how the treatment works. It does change the way nerve cells communicate with each other by changing the levels of certain brain chemicals which are important for maintaining mood.